VEILED IN THE FLESH

December 21, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Isaiah 7:10-14
Matthew 1:6,16,18-25

"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus..."
--Matthew 1:21 (RSV)

The most important words ever written about us are these:

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way."

But they are about an event that took place long ago and far away, aren't they? Yes - but they are also about us and everyone seems to know it.

The whole world stops to listen to the words. In an astonishingly consistent way, the world becomes quiet and reverent to hear those words. The reason is that the words are about us.

People who believe the words to be true know that...and people who do not believe the words are historical or even relevant also seem to know that, even as hope, the words are about us and they propose something fundamentally good about us.

Religion, on the other hand, seems to begin by saying something bad about us.

Most religion seems to be an effort to deliver us from our humanity, save us from our humanity, or help us deny our humanity. Sometimes it is carried off in sophisticated philosophic constructs. And sometimes it is a reaction to humanity at its most flawed and unflattering. Every time we begin to feel good about ourselves - someone, somewhere does something ghastly and reminds us, that as a race, we are a long way from perfect. But with amazing consistency, religion comes out sounding as if our humanity is so distorted, so sinful, so totally depraved, that our only hope is that someone or something will deliver us from it.

As it turns out, that is a nearly elemental religious impulse against which the Gospel of Jesus Christ stands out in vivid contrast. It is expressed in avant-garde fascination with Eastern spirituality, some forms of which focus attention away from the world and humanity, and celebrate the practiced ability to transcend the flesh, to mortify the flesh, to endure voluntary physical pain, for instance, in order to demonstrate that true spirituality means to deny humanity. The medieval monks concluded that a cloistered life is more spiritual than a life lived in the world, and that a celibate life is more holy than life lived in the fullness of human sexuality. The elemental religious impulse away from the

world has found expression in the uninterrupted religious suspicion that sex was one of God's big mistakes.

The other worldliness of religion is expressed in the stereotypical Puritan suspicion that too much cheerfulness and joviality is of the devil; that if it feels good, it must be bad, that religion - by its very nature, is grim and serious business, without color, beauty, excitement or joy. (When we wrapped the trees around the church during the Arts Festival, we discovered that nothing is so disconcerting to a quasi religious public as a religion that is intentionally whimsical on occasion, and artful and interesting and colorful, or a theology that suggests God does something more than scowl and frown at the human race. Indeed that God frequently has a twinkle in his eye). And the impulse finds current and eloquent expression in the kind of theology which you will find on Sunday morning television describing the sins of the flesh so vividly that one is never sure whether to be appalled or entranced - like standing at the supermarket checkout counter, unable to avoid seeing the covers of the publications and the lead articles and trying to decide whether it would appear to be prurient interest or moral outrage if you reached for the magazine and opened it and took a good look. And, of course, it is expressed in the religious bottom line, the product marketed, as it were - by religion in this and every culture that ever was - "pie in the sky bye and bye."

In a world that thinks that way, Christians are at a disadvantage at Christmas as soon as they start talking about their basic contention - namely that God's full disclosure was a human being, Jesus of Nazareth If our humanity is so flawed, after all, how could it possibly be the setting for Incarnation, the en-fleshing of God? Most incarnation talk focuses on the incredible mystery of deity becoming human. Theologies of incarnation are tough going. But at Christmas, at least, the tilt is in the other direction entirely. The real shocker is not that God could do it, but that our humanity was once the vehicle for God's Revelation - and perhaps still is. The marvelous and wildly improbable dimension of a Christian Christmas is in what it says about our humanity. Christmas radically affirms the world - not as the place where all the evil lies, but the place God so loves he sent his son to live in it. Christmas radically affirms our humanity, not as a condition from which we must be delivered to be saved, but as the condition good enough and full of enough potential and creativity that God chose it to demonstrate his holy love. Christmas suggests that God is interested in our humanity - not just our religious activities - but all our activities, the more human the better. Christmas profoundly embraces human life.

Matthew understood that, it appears, before anyone else. Mark, who wrote first, begins the Christian story with John the Baptist and the man Jesus meeting at the Jordan River, and then starts in immediately with Jesus' life of teaching and healing. The Gospel according to John begins philosophically, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...and the Word was made flesh."

Matthew begins in a very different way, with a literary device very few preachers chose as a text. Matthew begins with that most human, most mundane of all objects: a family picture album, a family tree, home movies... "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David,

the Son of Abraham...Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah, and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez; "Abraham begat Isaac and Isaac begat Jacob" the King James Version translated and even though it never failed to set my chums and me to giggling whenever it was read in Sunday School, thinking of all that "begatting," I'm not sure the sense of the text is enhanced by the more contemporary and gentler translation - Abraham was the father of Isaac... There's a wonderful number in Finian's Rainbow, "Begin the Begat."

"Lordy, how they did begat...

how they multiplied" the song goes --

"Bless them that go to bat and heed the call

Begin the Begat."

It may offend our modesty but there is something honestly human about it, and about that wonderful list of people. Matthew, it appears, wants there to be no doubt that this is a very human story. The family album, once we begin to inspect it, is not full of priests,and stained glass and saints, but interesting full-blooded men and women, some of whom were rascals, cheats, liars, murderers, a prostitute or two and David the King, who the author reminds us "was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah." It was quite a family! It is a very human list. Matthew wants no doubt about the full humanity of Jesus of Nazareth.

The story of the birth itself, as presented by Matthew, reflects the same determined effort to celebrate the humanness of it all, not hide it. It pulls us into a very human saga with one finely crafted sentence... "When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly." That's a sentence literally crammed with deeply human emotions; love and passion and jealousy, and humiliation, and fairness, and courage, and faith. That's the stuff of romantic novels and soap operas, the grist of human life at its most human.

"Betrothed" refers to the first step in the three stage, Jewish matrimonial procedure of the day. The first step was a formal exchange of consent before witnesses between a man and a young girl's family. The young women ordinarily would be 12 or 13 years old. The step is call "betrothal." Stage two is a period of waiting - a year or so. In some places the bride and groom could be together once, intimately, during that time. Stage three is the taking of the bride to the groom's family home. "Marriage" can refer to the beginning of the process - or the end. Betrothal means the first step. During step two, the waiting period, while they are betrothed, Mary is pregnant. In more strict times she would be tried, punished for adultery. Joseph is just: that doesn't mean he is soft. It means there is no question what he must do: he must divorce Mary. But the scandal could be awful. He doesn't want the shame of public accusation and so it will be a quick and quiet divorce.

Matthew means for us to know that when God wanted to speak a word to

the human race, he did not choose a flash of vision experienced by an ascetic monk at his prayers. It wasn't a burning bush, or mighty wind. It was neither mystical experience nor marvelous natural phenomenon but an utterly human story: a story that doesn't require religious sophistication to understand: a human drama that surely doesn't require moral perfection to be appreciated. It is a story about people like people we know: people like us. It is, therefore, a story about this humanity, this flesh, this person - the object of God's saving love. That's why it is so good.

I borrowed the title Veiled in the Flesh from one of my mentors, the late J. Harry Cotton, former Professor of Theology at Harvard. Dr. Cotton, of course, borrowed the phrase from Charles Wesley in his carol, "Hark, the herald angels sing." The essays he wrote under the topic are excellent. There is a sense of distillation about them; a long and effective ministry now focusing on the essentials. The major theological issue for modern Christians, Cotton wrote, is the humanity of Christ. And for us, people trying to be faithful, the life issue is something he called "Christian Humanism," a generation before Jerry Falwell and his friends appropriated and despoiled the word and the concept. Any Gospel worth our attention must begin with who we are: must take the world and the human condition very seriously: must address our human life: our relationships; our hopes and fears, our needs, our joys, our hurts, our birthing and loving and our dying.

The first, and most persistent, Christian heresy was a denial of Jesus' humanity. From the start we have had trouble with God, "veiled in the flesh." He only seemed human, the early heresy taught. Thus, he didn't hurt, get angry, hungry, tired, lusty - God forbid! The late Bishop John A. T. Robinson stirred up the Christian world 20 years ago with his book Honest to God, one of the truly important theological works of our life. Robinson was irreverent but honest - and about the Incarnation he spoke for many when he identified the traditional concept as "God Almighty walking around on earth, dressed up as a man."

You see if you can ignore - or at least minimize the humanity of Jesus, you can be rid of Christianity's disturbing power. If he wasn't as human as you and me, then when he was crucified it didn't really break either his heart or his body. And when he died on the cross he didn't really die.

And therefore when he said "love your enemies" he didn't mean that you actually had to do it, and therefore the "peace on earth" the angels announced actually is peace of mind which can be obtained by thinking positively and optimistically and cheerfully. It does not have to do with the worldly realities of killing people, and financing wars on every continent and selling arms to terrorists and building nuclear weapons for the day of total destruction. In fact, if you can spiritualize Jesus and therefore everything he said there is even a way to make war and claim his blessing on it if you are theologically flexible. And if you can keep Jesus safely distant from our humanity, then you can live comfortably with racism and injustice,in society and even within religious institutions.

Joseph Sittler warns that "We are tempted to regard God primarily as a God for solitude and privacy and only secondarily as a God for society... a God for my personal ache, but not for the problems of human life in the

world." [Gravity and Grace, p. 35]

You see where that leads, don't you?... to the insipidness and irrelevance of other worldly religion. It is a comfortable heresy, very civilized actually. It solves a lot of the problems stirred up by too much passion for human life and absolves us from any responsibility. It makes for a tidy piety, separate from life.

Of course it also deprives Christianity of the power to save us. It denies part of what God apparently had in mind in sending Jesus Christ in the first place; namely to reconcile us with our humanity: precisely to reclaim our attention and redirect it back to the human condition: to grace our humanness by becoming one of us so that we can be who we are fully, and live in this world with some sense of wholeness and security and freedom.

What we celebrate this week is the very essence of all Judeo/Christian religion: that God has come to us: become one of us: graced all human life and therefore our human life with divine life. What we celebrate truly is not our deliverance from this world of the flesh and sin and death but God's blessing of the world and humanity with the life of his son. What we celebrate is "God's humanity," Karl Barth once called the Christmas Gospel.

The best minds we have produced have struggled with ways to say it so the rest of us would understand. Sometimes the theology of the textbook and classroom does it.

And sometimes it is the nuances and symbols and beauty of the arts. There is an incandescent moment in Bernard Pomerance's "The Elephant Man" when the fashionable Mrs. Kenwick reaches out to and clasps the deformed hand of Merrick. It's a powerful and redemptive moment. That's what God did and does: in love, touches and embraces us, exactly as we are, affirms us, dignifies us.

And sometimes, I continue to learn, the mystery of the word made flesh, the incarnation is expressed and celebrated at just those times and places when we are most acutely aware of our own humanness: at the edges of life, at the extremities where we experience our humanity, our aliveness most vividly. We make the connections almost intuitively, and Christmas intensifies those most intense human experiences: birth - and death, for instance: critical illness and life at its lusty, robust best. A good friend told me that Jesus' humanity evolved from intellectual concept to healing power when, for the first time in her life, she had to endure relentless, overpowering, post-surgical pain, and the crucifix on the wall of the hospital room reminded her of a Lord human enough to know what human pain was about.

Madeleine L'Engle, author, Episcopal layperson, writes readable theology because it is always so in touch with human life. She is an unembarrassed and unapologetic parent and grandparent which is one of the reasons I like her. In a Christmas meditation, she recalled an intimate moment, rocking a grandchild: "There is no more beautiful witness to the word made flesh than a baby's naked body. I remember with sensory clarity

sitting with one of my babies on my lap and running my hand over the incredibly pure smoothness of the bare back and thinking that any mother (or father) holding her child thus, must have at least an echo of what it is like to be Mary, that in touching the particular created matter, flesh of our child, we are touching the Incarnation." [Circle of Quiet, p. 243]

The Gospel of Christmas, which somehow gets communicated to believers and non-believers alike, is that the world our home is a blessed place because it was also home for God's son, and that he - one of us, loved the earth and wondered at its beauty.

The Gospel of Christmas which is communicated and celebrated in customs and tradition, music and the art, is that our institutions are blessed because God's own son lived within them: our homes, our parenting, our brothering and sistering are blessed by reason of God's son having been born and loved and nurtured in them.

And the Gospel is communicated in the contagious goodwill, the sense that human beings can live together in peace and happiness. Our vulnerably human attempts to reach across the gap of separateness and occasionally be with one another are always blessed by reason of God's own son having lived among us. Madeleine L'Engle wrote: "I do not understand the mysteries of the flesh, but I know that we must not be afraid to reach out to touch each other, to hold hands." [Ibid, p. 244]

The Gospel of Christmas is that Christ is born again among us, that the incarnation happens anew in lives lived in faithfulness and courage and compassion. The Gospel of Christmas fills our hearts because it assures us that our lives matter to God, that our humble lives are surrounded by God's grace and taken up finally into God's eternal love.

Once again this week the ancient story will be told. And we will listen to it again, carefully, remembering and anticipating every detail. The whole world will listen: those who do not believe the story will join those of us who do believe because it is about God veiled in the flesh with the accent on the flesh. We will listen carefully because of the wonderful humanness, from Matthew's marvelous family album, to the human poignancy of Mary and Joseph's experience, to that most human event of all, -cradled in the simplest of words, yet words which we know instinctively are the most important words ever written because they are not only about God and the mystery of the incarnation, but also about us, our humanity, our life, our hope... "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way."

Amen.